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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Building Strong Families parenting program, which combines findings from recent attribution research with traditional ideas. Attribution is defined as the process by which people assign cause to behavior. The role of expectancy in attribution and the role of attribution in the relationship between parent and child are discussed. The program's attributional premises concerning parents' attitudes to their children are listed. The program consists of five sessions for parents. These sessions concern: (1) the power of perception; (2) bias blockages; (3) communication; (4) good governance; and (5) family lifestyle by design. The program was evaluated by pre- and post-test questionnaires for parents and children. Children of parents in the program indicated greater change in parental behavior during the test period than did children of control parents. Sample information sheets from the program sessions and a list of references are included. (BC)

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A Parenting Program with Attributional Insights and its Effects on the Parent-Adolescent Relationship

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Attribution

Attribution research is a branch of social psychology that is concerned with social perception. Attribution itself is the process by which people assign cause to behavior. An important application of attribution theory has been the understanding of perceptual biases.

Attribution and Expectancy

Wilson and Linville (1982, 1985) found that when college freshmen were told to expect some failure during their freshmen year, they were more successful academically than controls. Apparently the information enabled the freshmen to attribute their failure to normal, temporary causes.

The classic study on expectancy by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) demonstrated not only the beneficial effects on students of inflated teacher expectations but also the negative reaction of teachers to unexpected achievement.

Attribution and P-C relations

Harter (1982, 1983) found that children were more likely to attribute to themselves the responsibility for parental anger, than responsibility for parental happiness, sadness or fear. Phillips (1987) identified parent appraisals of a child's academic performance as more influential in the child's academic self-perception than even objective indicators (such as report cards). Attributions made by parents are very important to a child's developing self-perception.

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Attribution and parenting

Though parents have been found to see their own children as good (Gretarsson & Gelfand, 1988), the stresses of family living apparently make parental anger salient in the child's experience of the parent since they see themselves as responsible for their parents' anger (Harter 1982, 1983). Kanouse and Hanson have suggested that "in a world of ointment, the fly seems bad indeed" (1987, p. 56). Perhaps parents over-react to children's mistakes or perhaps parents neglect to communicate their positive affect.

Attribution and a parenting program

In order to help parents make more systematic and helpful attributions of their children's behavior, information about attributional bias and the role of judgments was added to traditional elements of parenting programs to form **Building Strong Families**, a five session parenting program. The attributional premises that guided the development of the program are:

1. An awareness of attributional processes and biases can help parents interrupt biased judgments of their children.
2. Parents will be able to help their children more effectively as they learn to gather data, explore alternatives with their children and attend to the unique meanings that people and behaviors have for their children.
3. Children will benefit from feedback from their parents that assures them that they are normal, that everyone makes some mistakes, and that their worst failures have nonpathological interpretations.
4. Children will benefit from parents who attend to their children's good behavior and who make an assumption of good faith, i.e. they believe that even the child's bad behavior is motivated by reasons that make sense to the child.
5. Because anger tends to be salient and damaging in children's experience, parents should learn to avoid or appropriately express their anger, use inductive childrearing practices, and make their positive affect salient.

The above premises were used together with traditional principles of parenting (Ginott, Dreikurs, Skinner) and the well-established parent socialization literature (Rollins & Thomas, 1979; Maccoby & Martin, 1983) to develop the five sessions described below. Program materials that accompanied the sessions are in Appendix A.

<u>Session I: The power of perceptions</u>. The idea that different views are to be respected is illustrated by anecdotes that have a hidden agenda. For instance, when Bruce asked his father how many abandoned children there are in Harlem, New York, and the United States, he might have want to be reassured that he would not be abandoned. Parents are encouraged to explore their children's perceptions and meanings. The class is presented with dilemmas and asked to respond to them. As a foundation for improved perspective-taking, parents are encouraged to see that each member

of the family experiences even the same episode very differently. Empathic, non-judgmental, and exploring communication is encouraged. The parents are also encouraged to give helpful feedback to their children: "You're OK." "Everyone makes mistakes." "Your intentions make sense."

Session II: Bias blockages. Parents are taught about specific biases and the ways they block perceptions. The idea of bias is at the heart of an attributional treatment. When parents realize that their own perception is colored by their experience and expectations they may be more likely to restrain their judgments. Radio spots from the Franciscans and TV spots from Bonneville International are used to illustrate blocked perception. The behavioral recommendations in this session are very similar to those of the first session: Recognize that people have different views and explore their perceptions for understanding. Session II also teaches specific skills. A written reframing exercise is done in which parents are provided with common, negative descriptors and asked to reframe them in a more favorable way. They are also encouraged to look for external or unstable as opposed to internal and stable attributions. Finally, the benefits of a supportive environment are described, and parents are encouraged to emphasize the positive with their children.

Session III: Communication. The core of session III can be described as communication principles. Parents are encouraged to listen and explore rather than react. Parents are also advised to avoid playing psychologist, to verify their perceptions in an open-minded discussion with the child, to assume good faith, use empathy, and explore possibilities with their children. Mechanisms for avoiding angry outbursts, such as the use of humor, taking timeout, and being solution-oriented, are discussed. "I" statements are taught as an alternative to damaging attacks and judgments.

Session IV: Good governance. Parents are acquainted with Dreikurs' reasons for misbehavior as well as the effects of different control techniques (power assertion, love withdrawal, and induction). Natural and logical consequences are discussed. Parents are encouraged to allow their children control over their experience by allowing choices that are appropriate for their development. Creative problem solving is encouraged. The motto: "Find ways to get to 'yes'" is endorsed. As part of the session, all parents complete a written exercise in which they evaluate the message that they send their children and then design a specific message that would be more supportive.

Session V: Family lifestyle by design. Parent behaviors have predictable outcomes in child behavior. A pattern of high nurturance and high standards (authoritative-reciprocal parenting) is recommended. A safe and stimulating environment is also discussed. Each parent receives a sheet summarizing the five

sessions and a list of books to help them as they continue to build a strong family.

It is worth noting that the parenting program not only teaches but also uses attributional principles. The parents are taught that it is common to have challenges with their adolescents. (Many parents report substantial relief to find out that other earnest parents are facing the same difficulties that they are!) The parents are also taught to be aware of the situational pressures that may hurt their parenting effectiveness.

Evaluation

Building Strong Families was tested with 107 parents of middle school children who signed up for a parenting class. Families were randomly assigned to treatment and control (delayed treatment).

Measurements were based on the Ellis, Thomas and Rollins (1976) nurturance items with additional items added that related to specific course objectives. Parents reported on their own behavior and the middle school children also reported on the parents. The middle school children were not treated in the program and were presumed to be relatively objective reporters.

Changes were assessed by two kinds of questions. Pre- and post-test scores were compared in customary fashion. As a second method, respondents answered questions that were only on the post-test that asked specifically how much change in the behavior there had been in the last few weeks. The latter items were called the change items.

T tests of mothers' pre- and post-test scores show that mothers saw themselves as significantly improved on 6 of 25 variables. Fathers saw themselves as significantly improved on 1 and significantly worse on 1 of the 25 variables.

Parent comments were solicited at the end of the post-test. The most common themes were that it was helpful to hear the struggles of other parents and that the teaching was positive and helpful.

Each middle school child reported on both mother and father, answering 25 items on each. Of the 50 items only 1 was significantly different from pre-test to post-test. However, on change items (discussed above) the children of treated parents consistently gave more favorable evaluations of their parents than children in the control group (11 out of 16 tests for mothers, 13 out of 16 tests for fathers). Apparently the change items were more effective at assessing change than comparing pre- and post-scores.

The reports of improvement could have been contaminated by the knowledge that the parents were involved in the parenting course. Also, the improvement cannot be said to be a result of the attributional elements of the course. The quality of instruction and the other elements of the course are factors in any change. One way to assess the specific effects of the attributional elements would be to use a video program with both control and

treatment groups and additional units on attribution provided to the treatment group.

Since participants were self-selected for participation in the program, the results may not be generalized to a specific audience. However, use of a control group strengthens the internal validity of the evaluation. The adolescent children's reports of their parents behavior is also a valuable adjunct to parents' self-report data.

The benefits of the treatment are expected to be greater with smaller groups, more sessions, booster sessions, and more learning resources.

Conclusion

While parent education has taken largely the same form for many years, research offers valuable insights that can be profitably incorporated into parent education. Research in attribution processes seems to be an especially good addition to parent education since it deals with processes by which parents make judgments about their children. Presumably those judgments are the basis for their interaction with their children.

This paper sketches a parenting program that combines recent findings from attribution research with traditional ideas from Ginott, Dreikurs, Skinner and the well-established parent socialization literature to form a parenting program.

The program was tested with a group of parents and was evaluated to be beneficial (increase in parents' nurturing behaviors) by both the participating mothers and their middle school children. For parent education to meet its objective of helping parents function optimally, it needs to draw from many theorists and to continue to benefit from research insights.

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Building Strong Families

H. Wallace Goddard & Brent C. Miller, Ph.D.

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Session I

Building Strong Families

The Power of Perceptions

Each of us has different perceptions. We can help our children by understanding their view and by giving them growth-promoting feedback.

A. Different Views are to be respected, not argued.
(Understanding comes FIRST.)

1. Look.
2. Listen.
3. Draw on your own emotional experience.

What people perceive as real is real in its consequences.

B. Explore their Perceptions and Meanings.(Save the Sermon)

1. Preserve parent & child respect.
2. Understand before giving ideas.
3. Let them carry their ball.

C. Helpful Feedback.(Imagine your boss...)

1. "You're normal."
2. "It's OK to make mistakes."
3. "I value what you are/do."
4. Friendly interpretation.
5. Intentions.

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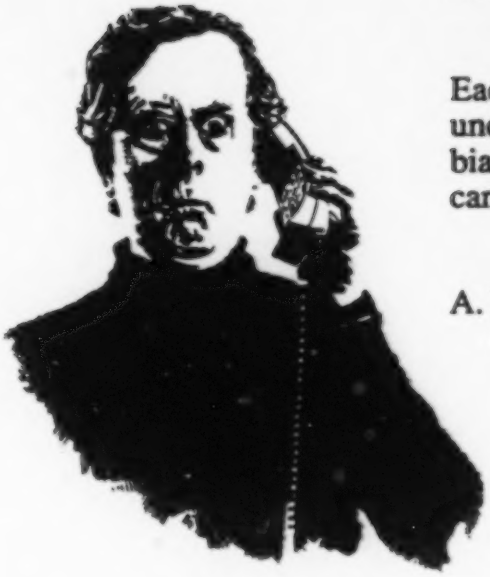
Building Strong Families

Session II

Bias Blockages



Each of us has biases that get in the way of understanding our children. Awareness of our biases, listening to our children and specific skills can help us bridge the gap.

A. Biases.

- World views.
- Fly.
- Halo.
- Attribution.
- Unpredicted.
- Anger.
- Power.

B. Explore their World.

- Circumstances.
- Meanings.

C. Specific Skills.

- Reframe.
- Attributing.
- Good Faith.
- Empathy.

D. Emphasize the Positive.

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Building Strong Families

Session III.

Communication

Communicating is necessary
to work out differences, build understanding
and strengthen our children.

A. Listen with Sensitivity

B. Manage Anger.

Keep the
message
sane.

C. State Feelings and Thoughts without Attacking

To what extent does this message
convey love?

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Building Strong Families

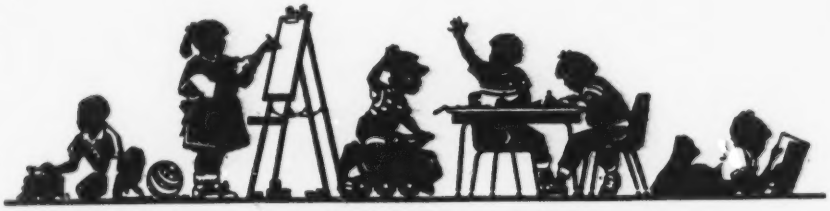
Session IV.

Good Governance

The way we govern in our homes has important effects on our children's development and on our relationships with them..

A. Attentive.

Be alert to their challenges, feelings and needs.
Reasons for misbehavior.



B. Empower (Not Power)

"Create an environment in which they regularly experience their control over what happens to them." Stephen Glenn

C. Love

Ways to convey love:

Listening.

Telling them of our love.

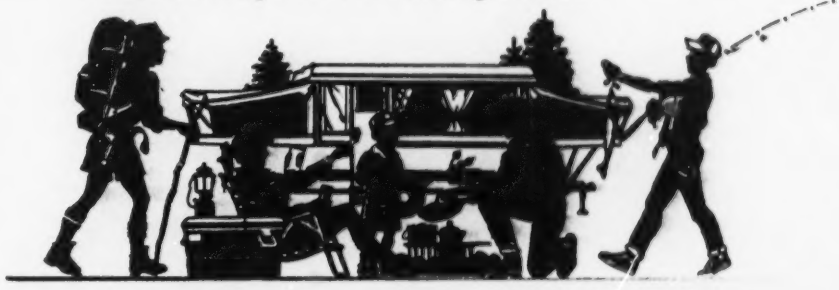
Correcting with respect.

Showing respect for their needs.

1. Carefully design the supportive message that you want to send.
2. Deliberately and consistently send it.

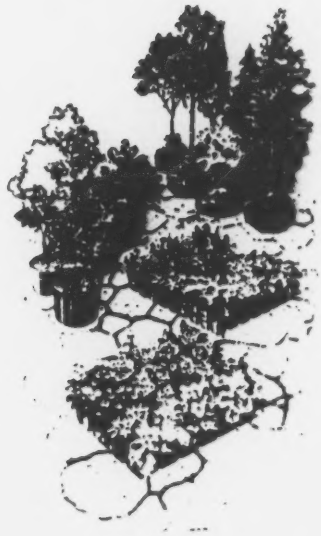
D. Take Time.

Make family time a priority.



Building Strong Families

Session V.



Family Lifestyle by Design

Plan your family environment and your parenting behavior to assure the family outcomes that you value.

A. Control Techniques.

Your choice of control techniques has systematic effects on your children.

B. Family Environment.

Stimulating.
Safe.
Supportive.

C. The Payoff.

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Designing your childrearing outcomes.

Parent Behavior	→	Child Outcomes
AUTHORITARIAN/AUTOCRATIC High demanding/Low responsiveness. Strict limits. Authority, tradition, order. Control, obedience. Punishment. Little verbal give and take.	→	Lack social ability. Withdrawn, dominated. Obedient, not quarrelsome. Lack spontaneity, affection, curiosity originality, independence. Low self-esteem. More damaging for boys. Low conscience, external locus of control.
INDULGENT/PERMISSIVE Avoid asserting authority. Few restrictions. Inattention & indifference.	→	Immature. Lack impulse control & self-reliance. Lack social responsibility & indepencence. Impulsive & aggressive.
INDIFFERENT/UNINVOLVED Not committed to the child. Keep the child at a distance. Avoidance of inconvenience. Abuse, neglect, unavailability. Unhappy, unconcerned, discontented. Parent-centered, low involvement.	→	Poor self-esteem and emotional development. Aggression and disobedience. Hedonistic. Low frustration tolerance. Impulsive, moody.
AUTHORITATIVE/RECIPROCAL Parents and children respond to reasonable demands from each other. Expect mature behavior. Set clear standards. Firm control. Encourage independence & individuality. Open communication. Listening. Recognize rights of p. & c. Inductive discipline. Democratic decision making. Allow choice & control. Nurturant.	→	Competent Socially responsible. More independent. High self esteem, self confident. See discipline as fair and reasonable. Able to control aggression. Achievement oriented.

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